

Sea Chests in the Civil War Navies

Wooden sea chests housing the personal belongings of a sailor have remained within the public imagination of historical maritime life.

While our collective memory immediately recalls the fantastical treasure chests of eighteenth-century pirates, including those depicted in fictive works such as Robert Louis

Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, these bulky storage containers continued to be used during the time of the Civil War.

Adopting the method of material culture, which examines physical objects for insight on the cultural experiences of their historical owners, we can use sea chests to learn new perspectives on the experience of Civil War sailors.

Neither navy of the Civil War issued sea chests. Rather, the sea chests themselves were among the personal belongings of a sailor. In this way, sea chests are particularly useful objects for exploring the individualism and personhood of their owners. Many Civil War vessels did not allow non-officers to

possess a sea chest onboard. In these cases, sailors stored their belongings in government-issued canvas seabags. While possession of sea chests was not universal, sea chests remained a commonly found object onboard Civil War ships. As personal possessions, sailors decorated their sea chests in ways reflecting their personality and social standing. Some chests, particularly those of wealthy officers, were decorated with ornate patterns, while others were painted simply and left unadorned. The chests almost always had the owner's name stenciled upon the outside, signifying individual possession.

The primary purpose of sea chests was storage. The objects found within the sea chests varied by their owner. Clothing was the most common type of item stored within a sea chest. Tools of the trade, including an engineer's drafting set or a surgeon's kit, could also be found. Other items were more indicative of the sailor's personal life. These include books, letters, and diaries which remained part of the deeply individual and private experience of sailors.

Focusing on the collective experience of maritime culture, historians have frequently described life onboard a naval ship as a shared subculture created by a self-contained society. The ownership of personal belongings stored away for private use, however, illustrates the individualism of sailors rarely found elsewhere on the vessels. Sea chests provide us with a rare chance to glimpse individualism within the Civil War navies. As storage of personal belongings, chests provided a limited form of privacy crucial to maintaining individualism. The privacy provided by the chests is most apparently exhibited by their locking hardware. The sea chests required a key for access indicating sailors' intentions of preventing discovery or theft.



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From the Executive Director



It's hard to believe that 2023 is already half over — and that it is SO hot outside! Fortunately, we can keep our cool at NCWNM.

I want to share some things that are happening at the museum right now. First, we've had some staff changes. You'll remember that Jeff Seymour, our historian/curator, left last year to take a DOD position in Hawaii. I replaced him with two part-time staffers; Logan Barrett as historian, and Brian Eli as collections manager. Recently, Brian has also departed, taking a full-time position at Andersonville Historic Site. We are very happy for him and wish him the best! The good news is I have promoted Natasha Beining, former visitor services assistant to take over as collections manager. Natasha has several years collections experience, having worked at George Washington Masonic National Memorial and Mount Vernon. The promotion is well-earned. To cover weekends and general duties, we've added Jamyah Dorman to the "crew." I hope you get a chance to meet her soon and experience her bubbly personality.

Another big "happening" at the museum — and many of you know about this already, is the fabrication of a new permanent exhibit entitled **Columbus: A Civil War City**. This exhibit, which details Columbus' significant role in the Civil War, will be installed in the Woodruff Gallery, alongside the CSS *Jackson*. The exhibit has been designed and we are currently looking for additional funding to begin construction.

And one more plea. . . Occasionally unique Civil War naval artifacts with national impact become available at auction houses. Of great interest to us right now are several items that belonged to Capt. Winslow of the USS *Kearsarge* that are coming up for auction in the next few weeks. These, and other naval items are hard to come by, especially for an institution with our limited assets! We are hoping to find a donor(s) to help us acquire these unique items that would make such a wonderful addition to the *National Civil War Naval Museum*.

Both of these projects are above and beyond our normal operating expenses but are extremely important to the stories we tell. If you are interested in helping us complete this new exhibition, or purchase artifacts like those mentioned above, please contact me and I will be happy to fill you in on the details.

We remain indebted to our membership, our annual donors, and to those who support our special projects.

Holly B. Wait

**It's Still Hot,
and we're still *COOL!*
Join us in July for
more summer fun.**



This July is a perfect time to visit the museum. Take a break from the heat of summer and cool off with some history! Our daily programs offer something for everyone from a fun day for the family to the serious history enthusiast.

Member Monday – Members take a guided walk through the museum. Experience the stories that your support helps bring to the public. This tour is complimentary for members while their guests pay a discounted admission of \$5.

Call ahead to make your reservation,
706-221-1782

Tours on Tuesday – Visit the museum for stories you will hear nowhere else. Take a guided tour of the museum and explore our unique exhibits. Tours are open to the public and start at 11:00am, 1:00pm and 3:00pm. Each tour lasts about an hour.

Cost: General Admission

Lunch and Learn Thursday – Bring your lunch and stop by the museum for an interesting deep dive discussion about the Civil War navies. The program starts at noon and lasts about an hour.

Cost: General Admission

Family Fun Friday - How did Sailors in the Civil War communicate ship to ship? How did those big, heavy ships float? Discover the answers to these and other questions when you join Sailor Sam for a special program that includes hands-on activities and educational experiences. This program is for students of all ages; it starts at 11:00am and lasts about an hour.

Cost: General Admission

A great opportunity for summer camp groups in the area — A sailor will bring

history to life through hands-on demonstrations and fun activities. Your summer camp group will take a tour of our unique exhibits and hear exciting stories about war on the water. Program takes about two hours.

Call ahead to make a reservation, 706-221-1782

Cost: \$7 + tax per person (10 minimum)

WILSON'S CAVALRY RAID THROUGH ALABAMA, SPRING 1865

WHAT: **Summer Lecture Program**

WHEN: **August 24, Thursday, @
7pm**

COST: **FREE & open to the public**

In the wake of the Confederate Army of Tennessee's disastrous campaign in Tennessee in late 1864, Union Major General James Harrison Wilson launched a cavalry campaign of destruction and liberation through Alabama and Georgia in the Spring of 1865. Having organized a corps of mounted and dismounted cavalry, Wilson crossed the Tennessee River in northwest Alabama and advanced toward Elyton, the settlement in north-central Alabama that would blossom into Birmingham, "The Magic City," during the Gilded Age. Dispatching Brigadier General John Croxton's brigade westward toward Tuscaloosa, Wilson directed his main body toward the Confederate arsenal at Selma. After breaching Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest's hasty defenses, Union forces crossed the Alabama River and turned eastward toward Montgomery. Continuing the advance into Georgia, Wilson's cavalry defeated Confederate forces at Columbus and LaGrange before culminating the operation in Macon. Later, Wilson's patrols captured Confederate President Jefferson Davis near Irwinville.

Ultimately, Wilson's Raid through Alabama and Georgia constituted the largest and most successful cavalry campaign of the Civil War. However, the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in mid-April overshadowed these military achievements, and Wilson's "liberation" of these Deep South states often goes unheralded or unnoticed.



Dr. Jim Day is Professor of History at the University of Montevallo. He holds a B.S. in engineering from the United States Military Academy at West Point, an M.A. in history from the University of Georgia, and a Ph.D. in history from Auburn University. His monograph—*Diamonds in the Rough: A History of Alabama's Cahaba Coal Field*—combines technological and social history to examine the industrial development of central Alabama. The book won the Alabama Historical Association's 2014 Clinton Jackson Coley Award for the best work on local history, and Jim was named UM's University Scholar for Academic Year 2014-2015. He also served as the inaugural Michael J. Grainger Professor in Modern History, 2018-2022.

Since retiring from the Army in 1995, Jim has taught history at Marion Military Institute, Judson College, Auburn University Montgomery, and the University of Montevallo. At UM, he teaches courses in Colonial America, Revolutionary America, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian America, the Gilded Age, U.S. History since 1945, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the History of Alabama's Constitutions. He also has developed Staff Ride/Terrain Walk courses on the Civil War battles of Shiloh, Chickamauga, and Franklin.

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... from April 1 through June 30, 2023

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~ continued from pg. 1
Sea Chests

Despite primarily serving as a source of storage, sea chests also provided secondary uses. They could fill the role of makeshift furniture such as a seat or a table. In this way, the chests served as an actively useful object in the sailor's experience. For instance, we can imagine a sailor taking a private moment to read or write a letter while taking a seat on his sea chest. Sea chests then become not just storage of private objects but even facilitate private moments.

The National Civil War Naval Museum holds sea chests such as those belonging to United States naval surgeon John T. Luck and Confederate naval officer John McIntosh Kell within the institution's collection. Exploring these sea chests as indicators of individual lives shows us new ways for exploring sailors within the social environment of a ship. Through the physical objects encountered daily by their owners and users, we can better understand the lives of Civil War sailors.



John McIntosh Kell

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*... By telling the stories of the navies
of the Civil War we connect people with
the past, giving them a better sense of
place and time. ...*

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Commodore ~ \$1,000

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